# Poppy

## by G. B. Stuart

(Extracted from *The Argosy* summer number of 1888)

In mid-August in the West Country there are but two colours largely represented in nature: the yellow tints of wheat, oats and barley, and the blue of the sea which fills in all the rest of the picture. Overhead there is blue—pale turquoise—and green is nowhere.

It is not a land of trees, for Dartmoor is close behind, and such groups of pines as have been planted to shelter the farm-houses look almost black in the noontide sun. Miles on miles there are of these upland harvest fields, divided by narrow lanes and stone walls that seem held together only by the hundreds of tiny ferns and creeping things that grow, and seed, and wither, and spring up again a thousand-fold more lustily every year. It seems as if it were generally high noon on our sea-girt high lands, with the wheat-fields like burnished gold against the sky.

All last summer Poppy Williams used to flit about the narrow lanes between the corn-fields, carrying her red umbrella, which could be seen for miles like a gigantic flower, and blinking her short-sighted eyes at the blinding blues and yellows. It was long since they had seen anything more trying than the hum-drum greys, and browns, and drabs of the

dingy London suburb where she was a Board-School teacher. When she wrote to engage Mr. Gridge's lodging she had signed her letter P. Williams (her Christian name was Patience, but the people of Stanacombe did not know that). Old Mr. Gridge, the sexton, had handed the letter round the village in his pride at expecting a "Lon'on lodger." He had looked for a young man, and lo, the coach dropped a young maid at his door, which filled him with apprehension. But she proved "mighty handy," and quite satisfied with the accommodation that old Gridge and his grand-daughter, Susan, had to offer.

And so arose some discussion as to how the sexton had fallen into this mistake. Whereupon Gridge justified himself by explaining that Peter and Paul and Percy, like the young Squire, and Pat, "if so be you were an Irishman, as there are a many tu Plymouth," were common enough lads' names; whereas he could not lay his tongue to a maid's name that began with P., saving Polly, that was "no christened name, and unlikely to obtain in Lon'on circles."

Some young farmer, with a touch of imagination (and sure, his name should have been recorded, for our Stanacombe men, though they have warm hearts, and shrewd heads, and strong hands, are not great at imagination), suggested Poppy for the newcomer's name.

The red umbrella was known by this time, for it had been up to the post once or twice, and had dawdled about the churchyard half the

afternoon, and the idea was sufficiently obvious to take the fancy of the whole village. Miss Williams became “Poppy” on the spot.

When old Gridge told her the nickname, she laughed, and said: “It is a great deal prettier than my own; I will have it for my country name, and keep Patience for town use—it is sorely needed there.” And as Poppy she was known through the length and breadth of Stanacombe parish.

There was one person in the place who never used the nickname, and yet he thought about it more than all the rest of them put together.

George Joslin was an odd young man, everyone allowed, and not only had ideas about farming which were entirely out of order according to Stanacombe precedent, but even went so far as to object to the gossip at the Dragon about the Lon’on lady and her doings. To do the Stanacombe men justice, there was nothing in their talk that Miss Williams herself might not have heard, had she been able to understand the jargon in which they commented on her “pa’ale fa’ace,” her curly hair, her thinness, the mourning she wore, and the “educated” fashion of her speech. But something of all this incessant curiosity—for in a Devonshire village a nine days’ wonder often exceeds its allotted span and dies hard then—jarred upon young Joslin, and he snubbed every appearance of it at the Dragon till it ceased, at all events in his presence. “He don’t ca’are for she:” “hur’s too fine for he,” the Stanacombe people said with their favourite disarrangement of the pronouns. And old

Gridge was supposed to have hit the right nail on the head when he propounded with much chuckling, “George Joslin be so parlous fine he’self, he ca’ant bear another person as has got edication, and that one a ma’ade.”

Be that as it may, no one at the Dragon guessed how often George Joslin thought about the London stranger; how in his daily work about the farm he would keep a watchful eye for the red umbrella; how in his sturdy, impenetrable heart he thought of the girl as Poppy.

Poppy! It was a pretty idea, suited to the sudden appearance of this girl in harvest weather. And yet, no true farmer loves the flower that thins and tangles his corn, and for all its brightness casts a slur on his land!

George would pull himself together with a shake, and turn to barn or field with fixed determination, only to find that ten minutes later his eyes were roving the landscape again in search of Poppy.

It was the old story, and I cannot explain it, though story-tellers are supposed to know everything.

All this while Miss Williams knew nothing of the interest she excited. She was out-of-doors all day long, for the doctor had ordered her to make the most of her month’s holiday. He himself had told her of Stanacombe and advised the sexton’s lodgings, having noted all the

advantages of quiet sea air, fresh milk and low prices, when on a visit to the rector a few years before. He might have made the little promontory a fashionable health-resort in no time, by telling his rich patients about it; but being a wise man, he continued sending Lowndes Square and Wilton Place to Torquay, and Tenby, and Llandudno, and kept Stanacombe in mind for poor people like Patience Williams.

Most days she took her dinner with her in a basket, which likewise contained a book and a piece of white work; for this was her season for sewing, when no dread of the "Inspector" haunted her leisure. She would start about ten o'clock, while the stone walls still threw a little narrow shadow westward, and make her way by rough tracks to one of the tiny bays that lie at the base of the Stanacombe uplands. Here Poppy could spend a whole day without interruption. The sheep let her pass close by without fear; the long-backed red Devon cattle, of whom, oddly enough, the London girl was no whit afraid, eyed her seriously, and allowed her to rub their ears; the gulls swooped close down, as she sat working, and then slanted away across the blue waters of the bay. The days were one long blaze of sunshine. Then slowly the sun began to drop behind the big hills in the west, and a little crisp sea breeze would spring up and ruffle the waves. It would be time then for the girl to gather together her belongings and stroll homewards to supper at old Gridge's cottage by the churchyard gates.

One evening—a day that George Joslin never forgot—a sudden shower came on at sundown; large, slow drops fell on the thick dust of the roads, and made round holes as if printed with a stick, George, passing the cross-roads, at the top of Cove Lane, on his way back from Polworthy market, saw the slight black figure, that could not be mistaken for a Stanacombe girl, coming quickly along, and slackened his pace that she might catch him up. For a minute or two the slope of the lane hid them from each other, just time enough for George to divest himself of his coat, and spread it on the rough seat of his tax-cart. To be sure it was a risky thing to present himself to his lady-love for the first time in his shirt sleeves, and she a Londoner, but the shirt was a good one—home-spun and home-stitched by old Mrs. Joslin's careful hands, and the board of the cart was narrow and hard. To the big rain-drops George never gave a thought. When Miss Williams came round the corner of the lane, the cart was waiting for her.

"May I offer you a lift?" asked George; "'tis likely to be a heavy drop of rain, and you've a long step home."

"I'm stopping at Mr. Gridge's, in Stanacombe," Poppy began, with a Londoner's incredulity that a strange man in a cart could know who she was and whence she came. "If you are going that way—"

"Jump up, jump up," George said, holding out his hand to help her. "I know who you are very well, Miss Williams, and where you are lodging.

You haven't discovered yet, maybe, how curious we are in Stanacombe, and what a lot we knows about our neighbours' business. Is that right?" and before the girl knew that she had consented, she was safe in the high cart, with George's coat tucked all round her, and her basket safe behind.

"But your coat? You have given it to me, and you are getting your arms and shoulders soaked," she expostulated.

George was an honest man, but it is wonderful how easily a fib will pop out on occasions, even with the most truthful. "It was so warm in tu Polworthy. I can't stand the heat in tu town of market days. I was born and bred in Stanacombe, where it's always breezy, so I'm glad to be rid of my coat," he answered, without hesitation.

It was well for Joslin's shoulders that the drive was barely a mile. But he was careless of rheumatism, and would have risked a far worse penalty to have prolonged this first unexpected tête-à-tête with Poppy which had come to pass so naturally; not at all in the elaborate manner that George had thought it over and tried to bring it about.

The young people chatted as easily as if Miss Williams knew no town-bred scruples about making chance acquaintances, and George had never received a hint from his mother that she hoped her daughter-in-law would be good, honest, country "cloam," not a piece of fine London china.

The young Board-School mistress was accustomed to meet plenty of people, and all her interests were in men and women and children; there were no other interests in her dingy suburb; and after a fortnight of old Gridge and little Susan, and country quiet, it was pleasant to make so well-spoken an acquaintance as George Joslin: who, for the very opposite reason, and because he knew nobody but the handful of Stanacombe people he had been born amongst and took for granted, was fascinated with this slim, delicate creature from another sphere, with her anxious eyes, her crisp, quick speech, and eager questions about country things.

"Had it been a good market at Polworthy?"

"Tu Polworthy," repeated George, with his local correction. "No, a poor market for sellers. Cattle and everything had gone at a very low price. A great show of beasts, and no one to buy them, for the drought had dried all the grass, and no one had a mouthful of pasture left."

"Had he been selling?" Miss Williams asked.

Mr. Joslin was glad to answer "No." He had only been in to Polworthy with his mother's dairy produce, which went always to the same dealer, and realised fortunately as high a price in proportion as the live-stock was at a discount. For his own part, he had looked about for a Jersey cow, to make up their dairy number, but had seen nothing to suit him; and he confessed he would have cared little to take a strange cow home

from such a lot as had been on view at Polworthy cattle fair that day. There had been suspicious appearances of disease in some of the fagged, over-driven looking herds that had come into market.

“Those are my Jerseys,” he said, with pardonable pride, pointing with his whip to a herd of fawn-coloured cows in a field that ran along one side of the high road. “It is one of my fancies to breed Jersey cows; the prettiest cows to handle, and the best milkers and the safest profit all round that a dairy can have. Look at them, now,” for two or three crowded against the gate of the field, and pushed their black noses through the bars; “they’re so knowing, I believe they hear my voice half-a-mile away,” and he gave a rub with the butt end of his whip, as the cart went slowly past, to the head of the nearest.

When Patience Williams pleasantly shook hands at parting, Joslin was moved to utter the request that had held him tongue-tied for the last five minutes of their drive.

“Aren’t you sometimes very dull of an evening. Miss Williams? If you would care—if you would do us the honour—my mother would be so pleased to see you up at Pounders.” And indeed his own satisfaction at the prospect made him forget that Mrs. Joslin had yet to be consulted.

“You know which Pounders is?” he went on. “If I brought a message from mother perhaps you would honour us so far as to come up to tea

some evening, and see something of farm life, and I would see you safe home after."

Miss Williams smiled, and said good-bye without definitely promising anything, and Joslin drove away. It suddenly occurred to him that he was offering a good deal more on his mother's part than she might be inclined to perform.

As for Poppy, she was fairly pleased with her little adventure. She had missed human companionship in the Devonshire quiet, and though the talk had been of bullocks it had been an agreeable change. Mr. Joslin—he had told her his name—had spoken of showing her something of "farm-house country life." Poppy smiled at this a little sadly; did he think she had never seen anything out of London, she wondered?

Up at Pounders, George Joslin's little escapade was wearing a very different complexion to what it did either in his mind or Poppy's. The birds of the air carry such matters in a Devonshire village, and though he had passed through Stanacombe village apparently unnoticed, he had not been at home more than an hour before some kind friend had reported the whole affair to Mrs. Joslin—with additions more or less—and her son knew very well when he came down to supper that she had heard it.

It was useless to try and interest her in Polworthy prices when she was sniffing audibly under this new grievance, and clashing plates and

teacups to indicate mental agitation. George eat and drank in silence, nerving himself for the explanation that was to come, and for the hundredth time wishing that Stanacombe gossip would let his affairs alone. But he might as well have wished the sea less blue, or the roads less stony, as such a radical alteration.

By-and-bye, when Susan had cleared away supper, and George had got out his pipe—his mother, meanwhile, in ostentatious dolefulness, sighing and "strigging" red currants for preserving—the young man began in would-be-confident tones:

"Mother, I want you to go down to old Gridge's to-morrow, and pay a visit to the young la—person that's lodging there—Miss Williams, from London."

"Eh?"

George was forced to repeat his sentence. It had come forth glibly enough at first, but on repetition it sounded self-conscious and constrained.

"My days!" said Mrs. Joslin. And since when, I wonder, have you come to the conclusion that your mother hadn't enough to fill up her time at Pounders' Farm?"

“I know you’re always busy, mother,” George said gently; “but I thought, maybe, you’d manage to find time for this. The girl’s all alone there; an orphan, and glad of—”

“A bit o’ company, no doubt, that she jumped at yours so readily. Thank you, George, but I don’t care to pick my acquaintances from strange people that go flinkin up and down the roads, on the lookout for a lift in a cart, or a chat with a lad, when they feel lonely. My sort have something better to do with their time!”

“Mother, you’re quite mistaken! Miss Williams has been ill, and was sent here for change of air. She seems to work hard enough in London; that’s what has knocked her up. I never spoke a word to her till this evening, when it was raining, and I offered her a cast as far as old Gridge’s; and I thought—”

“Then you thought wrong,” interposed Mrs. Joslin.

“That you’d, maybe, ask her here to tea some evening,” George went on desperately, “and make her welcome. ’Tis uncommon dull in the cottage there, now the evenings are closing in, more especially for a Londoner.”

“I tell you once and for all, George Joslin, that I’ll have no Londoners at Pounders; neither will I go a-visiting Londoners anywhere at my time of life. If you choose to carry the girl about in your cart, to Polworthy

an' back, 'tis no account o' mine; nor if you're a mind to waste your time in the dimmit (twilight), hangin' round Gridge's cottage, as I *do* hear; but you won't drag me into it, and that's final. And bum-bye you'll thank me!" with which Mrs. Joslin closed every argument.

"But she'll never let me know her on these terms," muttered George, miserably, letting his cat out of the bag.

George Joslin's Jersey cows had the plague. The news spread like wildfire through Stanacombe, and the direst details were added with every repetition of the terrible tale. All the pretty creatures were struck down—it was a judgment on Joslin for bringing in a strange strain of cattle that was never meant to take in Devon. Or they were all dead at a stroke. It mattered little which account was handed on, for sure if they were struck, they were as good as gone. No one had ever known a cure for the terrible "plague."

Some said that a herd of diseased cattle passing towards Polworthy had tainted the Jerseys, whose pasture lay along the high road. But a more favourite theory was, that keeping Jerseys at all in Stanacombe was one of Joslin's "foolish fancies," bound to come to grief; if by sudden plague, so much the more convincing to all the wiseacres who had long ago shaken their heads over it.

Of course the judgment was exaggerated on all sides; but the truth was bad enough, as the neighbours saw who crowded into Joslin's farm-yard, full of sympathy and curiosity, and inextinguishable gossip.

Two beautiful cows had been carried away to the trench at the bottom of the ten-acre, and buried under a cartload of lime. But another white heap had been left significantly near, for five more of the soft-eyed Jerseys lay sick to death in the byre, and so soon as the inspector should arrive from Polworthy, George knew that the fiat would go forth to have them all polled.

George looked ten years older as he passed to and fro in the yard. He was thinking less of his monetary loss than of the beasts' sufferings, for he had a tender heart for his animals, and the reproach of having brought the Jerseys to this strait lay heavy upon him. Their loud, painful breathing could be heard in piteous monotony through the yard, where the farm servants stood about uselessly, unable to help the sufferers in any way and unwilling, as the manner of servants is, to go about any other duties at such an exciting time.

And in the midst of this group of idlers, whom George had not the heart to disperse, as he stood himself a little apart with one hand across his eyes, appeared Poppy Williams, pushing through the men and coming straight towards the master. No sauntering, delicate girl under a red umbrella, as the Stanacombe farmers knew her, but a resolute

woman, intent upon a woman's first mission of relieving pain in the weak and helpless.

"Mr. Joslin, will you let me see your cows? I'm not asking out of curiosity."

"'Tis no sight for you. Miss Williams; the poor beasts would only disgust you—"

"I must see them!" And Miss Williams pushed past him into the shed. "Yes, it is just what I thought—I have seen it before. Now, will you let me tell you what to do to save them? Five years ago, when I was a girl in Buckinghamshire, my uncle's cows were all struck down with this pneumonia. They were as bad as this, and four had died. We had a dozen down when we tried this remedy, and we pulled every one through after that. I remembered that I had all the treatment written down in an old notebook that I brought with me here. Will you give it a trial, and save your cows?"

"Let them die in peace?" repeated Miss Williams, catching an objection from a murmur in the crowd. "Do you call that dying in peace?" And she pointed to the glazed eyes and quivering sides of the poor beasts before her, whose every breath shook their dry, fever-stricken bodies and ended in a faint groan.

“I came in to see if they looked like ours did,” she explained to Joslin; “and they might be our own lot over again; but I believe I can save them if you’ll follow my directions. It’s worth trying, for the inspector would order them to be killed at once.”

“God bless you! Tell us what to do,” said George.

Well, they packed and douched, and rolled the cows in the hydropathic fashion which saved so many cows’ lives when the plague visited the home-counties a few years back. Poppy called out her directions in her Board-School voice, sending the loungers hither and thither for cans of water, and for Mrs. Joslin’s store of winter blankets and rugs, for strips of material to be torn into stout bandages by the women who crowded out from the house.

Before an hour was out the five cows were enveloped in the coldwater swathings of this hydropathic treatment; and by the time all the patients were rolled into shapeless bundles, it was necessary to repeat the treatment in the case of the first. And so on, and so on.

The sun was high in the mid-day sky, and presently Poppy sat down on the edge of the stone drinking-trough and put up her red umbrella for shade. The men were all working regularly now in that established routine which is the mainspring of success when you are dealing with such instruments as farm-labourers.

Just as she sat down, George came stumbling out of the cow-house as if he were blinded by the sudden sunshine, and caught hold of the wooden paling against which she leaned. There were tears in his eyes, and he choked as he tried to speak.

"What is it?" Poppy asked, starting to her feet as though she had relaxed her vigilance for a moment in sitting down. "Any fresh symptoms? any one of them sinking?"

"It is Brown Jessie. She's—she's all of a beautiful perspiration, and she licked my hand!" George said.

When the inspector arrived, Joslin's five cows were all doing well, and there was no question of polling them, nor of further use for the trench and the lime-heap in the ten-acre meadow.

"This is the packing treatment," said the inspector. "I've heard of it, but it haven't come within my experience before. It is a mercy you had knowledge of it, or you'd a had a very empty shed here to-night." And when he heard that the young London lady had introduced and directed it throughout, he whistled so loud and long that George blushed scarlet in the darkness of the cow-house.

Poppy had slipped away before the arrival of the great man, but she had satisfied herself that her patients were prospering; and she had taken advantage of George's occupation about "Brown Jessie," who was

making the speediest recovery of all, to escape from his impending gratitude. And the next morning when Mrs. Joslin, in her Sunday black silk, stepped down to the sexton's cottage to call upon the Board-School mistress, she found old Gridge hanging over the gate in a state of flat despondency, the reaction from unwonted bustle; and learnt that Miss Williams's holiday was over, and that the Polworthy coach had carried her, an hour ago, out of Stanacombe on her first stage towards London.

When George Joslin came up to London in the autumn after all the harvest was in, and made out the dingy street in the dingy suburb where Miss Williams lived, he wondered that anyone who had once breathed Stanacombe air could exist there for a single day. When he saw the beautiful pink colour that came into Poppy's pale face as she recognised him, he marvelled still more.

In the dull weeks after her summer outing, Patience Williams had often thought of Stanacombe and the pleasant young farmer; of the scene in Pounders yard, and her own dramatic disappearance directly afterwards. She had wondered a little that no letter of thanks or acknowledgment had followed her, and had set Joslin down in her own mind as a trifle less nice than he looked. Indeed, she was just a little disappointed in him!

And now, on this dullest of dull afternoons, there came a rush of fresh air from Stanacombe, as George put down his little country hamper, saying: “My mother sent you this, and she thought you would hke to hear how the Jerseys were getting on.”

The Board-School authorities had notice at Christmas to provide themselves with a new head-mistress. And old Mrs. Joslin is wont to declare of George’s wife that though “one of his fancies,” she has turned out a “ra’are and good bargain.” But then “to be sure” she was no Londoner after all, but a Buckinghamshire maid, that had been driven up to town through family misfortunes; though Mrs. Joslin mere forgets to add that her discrimination failed to discover this in the first instance.

And George calls his wife not Patience, but Poppy.